

# Ballads and Popular Politics

Professor Andrew McRae in conversation with Dr Alexandra Franklin

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**Andrew McRae:** We are at the Bodleian Library in Oxford and I'm with Dr Alexandra Franklin, who is the coordinator of the Centre for the Study of the Book. We're looking at a ballad here: something that would have been utterly familiar to British people in the seventeenth century but takes a little bit of time for us to interpret. What ballads provide historians that other documents don't is a format that very obviously engages with more than just words. They take us by means of the illustrations and the tunes into other forms of communication for a society that actually had very low levels of literacy. They are powerful visually. And they're designed of course to be sung and performed. Alex if we look at this printed ballad, what do you see?

**Alexandra Franklin:** Well Andrew, the words of the song, a few pictures, and the name of the tune. And this is a complex media package. And all of this tells us a lot about the society that made these items and the people who bought and sold them. These were not spontaneous productions from the street. Ballad printing was a business for London printers, just as popular music today is a commercial business. But just as we regard popular music today as expressing certain collective mood or shared ideas and tastes, the ballads should be seen as products that were designed to appeal to a certain market.

**AMcR:** So we'll come in a minute to the political ballad. But first it would be worth getting a bit more of a sense of the kind of subject matter covered in ballads, just more generally.

**AF:** Well the popular cheap ballads were extraordinarily varied in subject matter. Some are essentially folktales about starcrossed lovers or poor servant girls who end up marrying a prince. Others are about remarkable events: for instance a flood or an earthquake or a deadly storm or even a whale washed up on shore. Or they might be about famous heroes or dastardly pirates.

**AMcR:** So who was reading the ballads?

**AF:** These were some of the cheapest printed reading material you could buy. We have to assume that the audiences were varied: from young apprentices in London (these young unattached men seeking a thrilling story) to perhaps a pious older woman wanting some entertainment at home. Some devoutly religious people disliked or even feared ballads, thinking they were frivolous and people should read the Bible instead. In the 1650s a Quaker reader was horrified at seeing, as he said, 'the streets and walls painted with ballads and fables'. And specifically, because of the woodcut illustrations, he thought they were breaking the second commandment against the making of graven images. He wrote: 'ye ballad makers and ye ballad sellers and printers of them, and buyers of them, beware. For the Lord saith thou shalt not make any image of male or female.' And in fact many booksellers' shops did burn down the Great Fire of London in 1666. Anyway, what his pamphlet does tell us is that the ballads were not just read by individuals at home, but they were shown through the streets.

They were posted up on tavern walls for everyone to see. When we look at political ballads, we need to remember that the ballad as a genre had a very ropery reputation. It was the tabloid newspaper of the seventeenth century.

**AMcR:** So who were the writers of these ballads?

**AF:** We know a couple of names: Martin Parker and Laurence Pryce. But for the most part, they are anonymous. But we do know that some ballad writers became known for writing certain types of ballads and for having an opinion. Mostly, though, they were hack writers; they would write whatever would seem to sell.

**AMcR:** So who would make money from this? Would it be the writers or the printers?

**AF:** It would be the printers or, as we might call them, the publishers of the ballads. They had to register the titles of ballads with the Stationers' Company and they could keep reprinting these songs for as long as they would sell. And then they would sell them out on the streets.

**AMcR:** And you say they were cheap. Just how cheap were they?

**AF:** They cost a penny, which is very cheap by our standards, but at that time would be about the equivalent of buying a CD today. And if you think of it, that's the kind of expense that someone who has some income but is unattached, young, maybe doesn't have family commitments or a lot of household expenses would happily go and spend money on. And that's another reason for looking at the ballads and thinking who was buying them? Maybe a printer's apprentice or young men not yet married, not yet with a household possibly. Those are probably a big market.

**AMcR:** And we know, don't we, that they could be spread across the country quite easily because they are so slight.

**AF:** Yes they could be taken around the country. They could be taken in pedlars' packs and sold in different towns. But of course you could hear them for free. People could learn the song and sing it in the street.

**AMcR:** So if we turn now to this one particular ballad, a wonderful ballad called *A New Game at Cards* published around the time the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. What do you see in this ballad?

**AF:** Well, let's look at the images first, because they're very striking. The illustrations on this ballad are, first, men drinking and talking in a tavern, then a portrait of Charles I, and then an old illustration of a courtier and a countryman. And each of these illustrations was made with a different woodblock with the image carved onto it. So they didn't necessarily have any relation to each other before they were all brought together and used together to print this copy of the ballad. But these were chosen as the visual support for this text that recounts the political ups and downs of the Civil Wars.

**AMcR:** And the images of course are often reused from one ballad to another, aren't they? And in this case, what do they tell us together?

**AF:** Well they represent three approaches to the idea of politics, I think. One is about people talking to each other: discussion, debate. The next is a portrait of an individual: king Charles I. And well, of course, by the time of this ballad he was already dead. But clearly one way of looking at the events of the Civil War is that these revolved around him. Would he keep his head? And it's literally his head which is illustrated here. The last image suggests the range of people in the kingdom. The courtier on the left is nicely dressed with a feather in his hat and patterned trousers, while the farmer has a round hat and a simple smock. And this image seems

to say: here are two different social groups in England. Are they opposed to each other, or are they united as subjects under the king?

**AMcR:** And if we look at the images together and think about someone picking up the ballad sheet: how do they shape the ballad's representation of politics?

**AF:** It seems to epitomise the voice that comes through in this song. This is the voice of people who gather together to comment on events. But perhaps they don't feel that they are really directing events themselves. The last verse of this song refers to standers by—bystanders—and I think of the first picture of the tavern men in this way. They're spectators; they're drinking in a tavern; they're discussing; they're watching the great game of cards. With the picture of Charles I, that's an interesting one to put on here. You could have definitely had a different picture on this ballad: why not show the new king, for instance, Charles II? This is, we know there is a version of this ballad that has a picture of General Monck, the general who brought back Charles II. But here the picture of Charles I looks back to the past, it looks to the old king. And the song celebrates the idea that the king had overcome the knave. By the time the restoration, both Charles I and Oliver Cromwell were already dead. But this ballad is less about news and more about the fortunes of politics, the fact that there are always winners and losers.

**AMcR:** Yeah, I mean the imagery of the ballad itself, the politics of a game of cards is striking isn't it? Probably not by today's standards, but certainly by those of the time. We think about the dominant theories of divine right and so forth, cutting right against them. In fact there appears to be in a few ballads from the 1640s and the 1650s and right into the 1660s that used games at cards as a code for political engagement. So we get Oliver Cromwell, for instance, typically is represented as the knave of clubs, as a kind of thuggish upstart. And obviously the king is the king of hearts, and holds greater power.

**AF:** Yes, the metaphor is of all political actors being kings or knaves in a pack of cards. And in this song, what could have been a confusing mix of allegiances and ideas that might have been experienced by someone living through the civil wars, is reduced to stark black and white, or red and black as in the deck of cards. Everybody has their place. everybody has their suit and value. It's also in this ballad: the title talks about the *new* game of cards. as we know, card games are customary activity. once one game is finished, you begin another. So this seems to sort of say that all of politics is just about chance; not destiny, but just how the cards are shuffled and how they're dealt.

**AMcR:** So I wonder, looking beyond this example, what kinds of roles ballads played in some of the other political conflicts of the century.

**AF:** Well, it's important to draw a distinction between the years, mainly in the 1640s, when censorship effectively broke down, and the rest of the century. In those years of upheaval, like at some other moments such as the Glorious Revolution in 1688-89, ballads were openly political or even divisive. In these times ballads could also perform the function of news: for example, reporting in verse the narrative of Charles I's trial and execution in 1649.

**AMcR:** And then, in one of the great centuries of political theory in England (we think about this as a century of thinkers like Hobbes, and Locke, and John Milton) we've got poems that are reminding us that most people across the country were perceiving politics quite differently.

**AF:** Yes, the political ballads exploit the expectations of the genre. They put political figures, even the king, into the role of heroes or villains, like the characters in traditional stories. This maybe in some way makes it possible for the popular audience to share these political stories

with other people on the street, in taverns, or in their homes. And maybe after the events of the Civil Wars were over, after the king's execution, then after Cromwell's death, and after the Restoration, these songs were capturing people's need to process those dramatic experiences that had happened into a coherent story.

**AMcR:** And I think, though, across the period: despite those moments when we get ballads on both sides of a conflict, it is probably fair to say all the same that they tend to be quite conservative, even compliant in their politics.

**AF:** Yes, if we look ahead now to the upheavals of the 1680s we again see ballads falling into line with the shift of mood and allegiance, and celebrating first the invasion of William of Orange, then the proclamation of him and his wife Mary as joint sovereigns.

**AMcR:** So in this kind of context, the ballads can be quite powerful forms of group definition, can't they? There was a risk that people might not celebrate the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 or the invasion of William and Mary in 1688. So it was crucial that these moments, to the monarchs who were taking over, that the people did celebrate.

**AF:** Yes, and that's the genius of the ballad genre. It's a song. Let's remember that the ballot is a song to be sung. So in this ballad, *England's Captivity Returned*, for example, General Monck is praised for bringing home Charles II, the heir of the executed king Charles I. It's a completely joyful song. But it then enforces that group celebration that singing allows. So one verse goes: 'let us all make a noise while those traitors lament'. and if you've ever sat around a campfire or in a pub singsong, the pressure to join in is strong. And that is what this political ballad plays upon. Join us and sing with joy for the restoration of King Charles, or are you a lamenting traitor?

**Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark):** Wood 417(4); Firth b.20; Douce Ballads 2 (145); Wood 401; Wood E 25.